



The Vision for a Beacon Community

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Visions often emerge from personal experiences of frustration, disappointment, and pain. Nineteen years ago, Leslie and I did not know each other, and neither of us had any idea that we were destined to become the founders of a model school community. I was a seasoned public school educator and she was a young, community organizer and social worker. But by the time we met, in 1975, in different ways and varying lengths of time, we had experienced the frustrations of working within traditional public systems. Within our separate experiences, we had realized that by the very way it was organized and managed, by its lack of coherent purpose, and by its open discouragement of a vital community interest in its work, the traditional public education system was neither efficient, nor effective.

We had each observed how much of the productive work in school communities was accomplished by creating major by-passes around the system or sabotaging the system completely.

It was disappointing to come up against centralized school governance, where policy was made by a Board of Education whose members were often lobbyists for the special interests of the populations of their municipal election districts; a Board of Education too often engaged in perpetuating itself and not the well-being of the district's families and children.

It was frustrating to work for change in large, alienating school buildings, where teachers must work alone, defending themselves and their students from the rigid and harshly neglectful practices of a centralized system; where hiring enough teachers, buying enough textbooks, providing arts, foreign language, physical education and sports programs were annual funding jeopardizes; where the resources and services of the school district were doled out like alms to teachers and students, seldom enough and seldom the things they said they needed.

It was frustrating to work in overcrowded, grade-level classrooms, where lock-step instructional programs were designed in a remote central office name downtown and could not be shaped by individual teachers; where daily instruction did not match what was known about how children actually grow and learn; and where children whose performance did not meet grade-level standards, were sifted, sorted, labeled, processed and confined until they had put in enough seat time to be liberated.

It was disappointing to work in schools that addressed a society whose economy and family structure had changed 100 years ago, where parents and guardians were openly discouraged from becoming involved in their children's school lives; not invited to learn about how their children were being educated; not encouraged to help identify and provide the resources each school needed, or organize social activities which would bring them together on behalf of the children, and build a strong community around the school.

Our frustration and disappointments then, came from our own unsuccessful attempts to change a troubled system from within; our pain come from finally recognizing that such powerful change was not going to come from within.

Our early work together forged an alliance; and as we begun to examine what did not work and why, we began to fantasize about a planned school community. And so the vision question emerged:

If you came back twenty-five years from now, and greatness had been achieved,
what would you see?

What is a vision?

In many ways, creating a vision is exhilarating work. I want to tell you what I know about the power of visions.

Visions are deeply personal statements, and remain so as they become shared visions within an established community. When the vision is powerful enough, it can change disappointed people into optimists who dare to dream a better way.

A vision, commands us to think about the future, and make choices. By its very presence, a vision forces us to acknowledge that what is presently being done is not good enough; that we are unwilling to go on doing what we have always done, and unwilling to simply stand by, or dragged into a future that will shape us without our needs in mind.

A vision is demanding; it turns us inward upon ourselves, to force us to consult the spiritual and idealistic parts of our nature, to accept that as uncomfortable as it may be, change is the constant and renewing source of all life and growth, and to understand that if we reject change, we are likely to fall backwards into flatness. It is our spiritual self who accepts the challenge to take the leap of faith; take big risks, make sacrifices, and endure the times when we must live cold, hungry, and lonely while we create the new frontier.

A vision is lofty. It captures our imagination, and engages our spirit; it makes the longings of our mind and heart palpable, visible, do-able. Visions are unreasonable because the heart knows no reason.

And, when we feel that our vision is asking too much of us, we can begin to trust that it is worth our doing.

By 1980, the vision of the school community of the future had emerged, and having pledged our commitment to that vision, Leslie and I set out to make it happen. Back then we called it “Wonderful School”.

The Vision of “Wonderful School”:

- commanded the founders to step outside into the private sector, to step away from the institutional reality and into the backrooms of research and development, to envision a school community that would be efficient and effective, identify each of its key elements, then build the working model that would demonstrate for now and all time, that it could be done;
- suggested that there would need to be three independent, yet interactive organizations, two market-driven schools of choice, and a services development agency; together the three would become the creative and sustaining life force, the nexus of the school community of the future;

- that both schools would base their educational programs on developmentally- responsive teaching; with staff training and parent education activities which matched the educational philosophy;
 - that a sister agency would provide both schools with administrative support services, opportunities for parent and community involvement, and development services which would protect the long term financial resources of the schools; be the corporate leader in demonstrating the possibilities of systemic school reform to the local and national community, in short, become the vehicle by which the school community would be nourished, sustained and perpetuated over time.
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Vision for Governance

Each of the three necessary organizations would be governed by its own Board of Directors, whose members would not dictate policy or supervise practices of the daily operations, but would bring their distinguished leadership to the tasks of stewardship; making policy and providing oversight assuring legal and fiscal integrity and raising money to supplement the organizations budgets... Each of the boards would protect and guide the interests and well-being of its own membership, while joining forces and combining strength to work on behalf of all three organizations.

Vision for Organization and Management

The faculty of both schools would further their personal and professional growth by participating in career ladder training at the schools, and become instructional leaders of clusters of classrooms.

A staff leadership council would determine school-wide policies; manage employment practices in their own workplace, create and manage their own budgets and make all spending decisions about classroom and school-wide purchases.

The leadership council would keep all staff focused on the vision, its mission, and goals, while providing program quality assurances to the school community.

Vision for the School Buildings, Classroom and Campus

The internal environment of the school, its hallways and classrooms would make the statement that here is a place created with young learners in mind; a workplace for young people, designed to resist the institutional look, with bright, clean, climate controlled classrooms; movable, flexible furniture, sturdy enough to take a beating and arranged to suit the activity; no teacher desks would artificially separate the teacher from the learner; materials for learning would be openly displayed and accessible to the students; classrooms where children and their teacher could eat lunch together, like a family; hallways which provided access to books throughout the day, and a well-stocked playground.

Vision for the Teachers and Staff

That those who came to teach at the school would come because they were interested in how we educate our students; that they would be willing to become learners themselves and faithfully study the Developmental way, and that they would stay with the school because they believe they believe that the way we do it works well.

That those who came to staff the school would allow students to call them by their first name; thereby teaching that authority is necessary, and when it is working best, helps each student feel secure while they learn.

That those who came to staff the school would present themselves as collaborators in learning, not teachers of subject-matter, but teachers of children.

That they would understand that from time to time students may enter a learning activity reluctantly; nevertheless, every learner can be engaged.

That they would recognize that students struggle with learning in personal ways; nevertheless, each student brings a personal and unique potential to the classroom.

That they would act on the fact that intelligence is displayed in various forms; nevertheless, each student unique pattern of intelligence deserves to be identified, engaged and nurtured in the classroom.

That they would eagerly examine new discoveries in learning, and from time to time select new or change their present teaching methods to more closely reflect the Beacon philosophy and the needs of their real and present students.

That they would invest a goodly measure of healthy self-interest into the continuous growth of the school.

That they would believe that all must succeed or none have succeeded; that the welfare and integrity of the school, and the achievement of its learners transcends divisive personal goals and concerns.

That they would build for each other, a caring environment of openness, governed by professional, mutual respect and teamwork and thrive personally and professionally within it.

Vision for the Education Program for Students

Where instruction would take place all year round, addressing the student's need for well-placed learning experiences, and parent's need for a socially-responsive school calendar; one that speaks strongly to the preservation of family life with an optional before and after school program.

Where students want to come to school because they want to learn, and they have developed relationships with their teachers and other students; they come to school because they feel both safe and known.

Where the students would attend class in non-graded, multi-age groupings; where placement in a group is not a factor of pass or fail, but the evidence of one's present stage of development in knowledge, skills, and behaviors.

Where students would be taught in developmentally responsive ways, where readiness to learn is not determined

by how old you are, but by what you can presently do, and what you need to learn next.

Where student's learning would be guided by the strategies of mastery, which ensures that over time, all students will be exposed to the same rigorous curriculum.

Where report cards would not be punitive and shaming, but informative recordings of the student's real and present strengths.

Where every student would receive hundreds of hours of instruction in the arts each and every year; where their teachers would themselves be practicing artists who could help each student create his/her own music, dance, drama and visual art. Where art experiences enhance the students' growth in basic skills; help them to explore yet another way to express their ideas and feelings, and develop their intuitive and creative abilities.

Where every student would be encouraged to bring his and her personal, and family identity into the classroom; where diversity of culture, gender and ability would be explored and honored alongside the bonds and goals of commonality; where one has experiences that support acceptance, tolerance and valuing of a diverse community of learners.

Where students would be taught affective skills, those which govern the display of feelings and behavior; increase their positive self image, understand the need for personal and socially responsible behavior, be encouraged not to fear evil and unkindness in the world but learn how to resolve conflicts, solve problems, and make life-affirming decisions.

Where the students will learn that to be an educated person is to be granted the power of wisdom over ignorance; the power of ability over helplessness; and the power of self-determination over the hopelessness of being dominated by others.

Where students would be encouraged to define life as they presently perceive and understand it, and not take for granted that life is as someone else says it is.

Where students would come to understand that the seat of knowledge lies within themselves, that they must weave their own unique interests, abilities and talents into the fabric of that which they will learn.

Where students would learn not to be afraid to know; not to turn their backs on a chance to learn; not to be afraid to work on tough problems, even when the problem seems to be beyond your present ability; to believe in oneself as a learner, that is always better to know, even when the knowledge is that which you wish you did not know; or gaining the knowledge causes you pain.

Where students would take on an increasingly greater responsibility for their own learning and with the help of their teacher, point the arrows of instruction toward that which they must know and do.

Where students would learn to work independently and in cooperative groups, become excited by giving of themselves, their skills and abilities, and then feel the success of a project well done.

Where students would 'learn how to learn,' and anticipate the joy of learning throughout their lifetime.

Vision for the Parents

Where parents and guardians would attend formal and informal educational events, would take an active role in learning about the school program; would stay involved in their child's school life, would join social groups with other parents and guardians, and actively contribute to the human materials need of the school community.

Where the total membership of a diverse population would give of their personal and material resources to make it possible for all parents and children to transcend the barriers of intolerance our society has erected against some children and families, and thereby enjoy the fruits of life within a peaceful community.

Vision for our Public Partners

We would invite members of the business community to work with us in developing new and innovative programs, programs that present us with the needs of the employer and employee in the 21st century.

We would contribute the products of our own educational research and development to the world by making them accessible for study; we would welcome serious students of all fields to our model school community, we would share what we learn and do so especially with our public school colleagues to whom we have a deep professional commitment; we would provide a way for all to gain access to the knowledge they seek, to show them ways they could take it back to their own schools, tailor it to fit, and insert it into the relevant social context of their own communities.

Vision for the School-Community

Where the school community, that is, every man, woman, child, and adolescent who comes to join us in this place, would feel a part of the whole, having given and received something of value. The integrity and spiritual values of our community would be evident to even the casual visitor, because they are being expressed in the ways we operate each day.

Each member would be cared for and encouraged to present his and her ideas expecting to be heard, though not always getting what they want.

A learning community and a community of learners, where learners of all ages, acting in many different roles discover and recreate themselves.

Our members would acknowledge that at its core, the impulse to learn is both generative and generous; motivated by a common human desire to expand our capabilities, to create, to give of ourselves.

As a community of learners, we would each participate and support the growth of effective people, who can be functional, open to change, able to solve problems, and make decisions. We would see ourselves as the agents of our own growth and change.

A community of greatness, a community of service, where each has his or her role to play and jobs to do; and each would do so with sense of engagement, dedication and joy; culling meaning and a sense of belonging from

personal action on behalf of our vision and mission.

A community of compassion and inclusiveness; a community whose members come from love; the love of children and love of learning; and because of the power of that love, our school and the school-community are good places to be.

And so,

Thirteen years after the birth of our vision, traditional school communities are still gasping for breath. One by one their vital organs are failing, and the desperate, tinkering efforts to restructure and reform them, have failed to provoke a systemic cure.

Since the 1982 opening of our day school, and the 1991 opening of our high school, it is no longer necessary for us to use the national picture of pain-without-gain to stimulate the vision that became a Beacon. Today we know that the Beacon vision, speaks out strongly on behalf of itself, to our own school-community and to the nation.

We can see that we are in the presence of something worth committing to, we can feel the commitment to a strong set of values about schooling, we can identify the community that gave it a life.

We know we have the determination to keep doing work that has meaning for us, to maintain integrity while we are doing it, and above all, to continue giving life to our deepest desire, to serve children and families.

Thelma Farley, September 1993